

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 14: Culture, Symbolic Systems, and Action 1

* Today we begin discussion of “symbolic culturalists,” specifically the work of Levi-Strauss and Edmund Leach in this vein

* This approach:

- sees links between symbols & social order as weak and indirect
- emphasizes the autonomy and language-like nature of a cultural system of symbols
- interprets symbols and symbolic action in terms of an independent system organized like a language for the primary purpose of communication
- shifts interpretation from a focus on what social reality may be represented (and maintained) by a symbol to what the symbol means (communicates) within the system of symbols it is embedded in
- illuminates “culture” as a more primary level of meanings, values and attitudes, while recognizing that cultural systems interact constantly with social organization
- is more concerned with questions of meaning than questions of function

* Intellectual boundaries between this and earlier traditions are messy. Indeed, earlier writers had noted analogies between ritual and language

Symbolic Systems and Symbolic Action:

* This new model distinguished between :

- (1) a cultural level frequently equated with the conscious and unconscious ideals and values of a group; and
- (2) a social level frequently equated with the empirical realities of

lived existence

* This made it possible to analyze culture as a semi-autonomous system, though provoking questions about how such an autonomous cultural system related to the actual social conditions of a community

* Claude Levi-Strauss:

- used a linguistic model to explain cultural phenomena other than language

- “if we want to understand art, religion or law, and perhaps even cooking or the rules of politeness, we must imagine them as being codes formed by articulated signs, following the pattern of linguistic communication”

- drew on developments in structural linguistics pioneered by Roman Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure (i.e. general and universal laws of language, grammar-like rules governing the production of cultural systems like art, myth, or ritual rooted in the biological organization of the human brain)

- attempted to uncover this underlying grammar by decoding two types of cultural phenomena: kinship systems and myth systems

- human beings impose a meaningful pattern on raw experience by classifying things based on common similarities and differences.

- classes and binary oppositions acts as a framework to interpret and order what would otherwise be the chaotic randomness

of human experience.

- after Levi-Strauss, relating the meaning of symbols and ritual to social organization declined. Religious ideas and symbols were now regarded as systems in themselves; the meaning of one symbol depended on the logic of its relationships to other symbols.

- The theorist decodes these relationships to uncover the invisible and unconscious structures that determined the manifest inter-relationships of symbols: their “real” meaning

* Edmund Leach:

- was not convinced that biology was the real explanation of the logic of symbolic systems
- argued that when the structuralist method was applied to the myths or rituals of a particular society, it did not arrive at universal structures, simply the cultural ideals of that particular society
- each social group generates its abstract models or cultural ideals
- “we engage in rituals in order to transmit collective messages to ourselves,” and these are always about the social order
- while Levi-Strauss argued for a single source for both cultural and social dimensions, Leach continued to maintain a clear distinction between them
- saw the social dimension as the source of a symbolic system that could nevertheless be analyzed independently of it.

* Leach used linguistic terms to depict the possible relationships among symbols within a cultural system:

(1) *Metaphor*: a relationship of asserted similarity or resemblance between two things arbitrarily connected and otherwise quite unrelated (e.g. serpent=evil in Genesis);

(2) *Metonymy*: part of something is taken to stand for the whole of it (e.g. a crown, which is part of royal garb, being used to stand for sovereignty);

(3) *Paradigmatic* associations are based on a type of structural resemblance that can be transposed to different situations (e.g. the relationship of a feudal lord to his vassal is replicated in the medieval notion of the relationship of God to the believer or a father to his son);

(4) *Syntagmatic* associations are chainlike relationships among elements in a type of series (e.g. the relationship among letters that make up a word, the musical notes that make up a melody, or the

words that make up a poem).

- * Leach compared syntagmatic and metonymical relationships to a melody; paradigmatic or metaphorical relationships to harmony
- * The opposition between *diachrony* and *synchrony* also roughly fits this comparison of melody (a matter of change) to harmony (a matter of simultaneity)
- * A symbol evokes a metaphorical, paradigmatic, or synchronic relationship between itself and what it refers to. A sign, on the other hand, involves a metonymical, syntagmatic, or diachronic relationship between itself and its referent.
- * Signs, as opposed to symbols, do not occur in isolation; they are always contiguous with other signs that together form part of a set; it is only as part of a set that a sign can communicate information
- * Since mixtures of metaphor and metonymy characterize all human communication, Leach suggested that it should be possible to determine what mixture characterizes the distinctive communication style of ritual
- * Leach suggested that ritual is primarily based on a logic by which metonymical relations are transformed into metaphorical ones.
- * Ultimately for Leach, ritual is a medium for the expression of cultural ideals and models that, in turn, serves to orient, though not prescribe, other forms of social behavior.
- * As a medium for cultural messages, ritual enables people to modify their social order at the same time that it reinforces basic categories of it. Ritual keeps culture meaningful.